Raiders Take SBC Opener, 77-64

Holt posts third double-double in four games, Blue Raiders push SBC winning streak to 25 overall and 31 in a row at home

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Amber Holt posted her third double-double in four games and Jackie Pickel came off the bench to hit four 3-pointers, leading Middle Tennessee to a 77-64 victory over Florida International Wednesday night at Murphy Center in the Sun Belt opener for both teams. Holt scored 18 points and collected 11 rebounds along with five steals and five assists for the Blue Raiders (5-5, 1-0), who won their 25th consecutive game overall against Sun Belt competition and their 31st straight home game versus SBC foes. Pickel hit four of the team's 3-pointers after struggling from behind the arc the last four games. She finished with 12 points and Brandi Brown added 14. Anne Marie Lanning also scored nine points with six rebounds in just 18 minutes of action. Middle Tennessee played without some of the same intensity it showed during a recent three-game road trip, but Florida International (3-7, 0-1) continued to battle as well, answering every run from the home team. The Blue Raiders put together two big runs in the first half, but the Golden Panthers would not go away. Middle Tennessee scored 10 of 11 points after the game was tied at 12, but FIU answered with a 10-1 run of its own to cut the deficit back to one. The Blue Raiders scored 10 of the final 13 points of the half as well, taking a 36-28 edge to the locker room. Middle Tennessee was just 5-for-22 from 3-point range in the half, but scored 15 points off 15 FIU turnovers in the first 20 minutes. Latoya Barclay had five points during the 10-1 run by the

Blue Raiders and Holt netted a pair of buckets during the final run before the half. Middle Tennessee started the second half with a 15-4 run to push the lead to 19 points at 51-32 with 15:31 left in the contest. FIU hung around and did not allow the Blue Raiders to blow the game wide open despite Pickel's best efforts from behind the arc. All four of her 3-pointers came in the second half. The Blue Raider lead stayed between 11 and 15 points for most of the remainder of the game. Holt was 9-for-18 from the field and posted the seventh double-double of her career and fourth this season. The Duluth, Ga., native has registered double-doubles against Houston, Maryland and Austin Peay previously this year. Brown scored 14 points but was 3-for-10 from 3-point range. The Blue Raiders were 7-of-15 from behind the arc after the atrocious first half and also shot 49 percent (16-for-33) overall from the field after intermission. Middle Tennessee hits the road for its final game before the Christmas break, taking on South Alabama Saturday at 5 p.m. **POSTGAME NOTES**
Jackie Pickel scored a season-high 12 points, hitting four 3-pointers, all in the second half. Pickel tied season-highs for FG made (4), FG attempts (8), 3-point FG attempts and assists (1). She also set a season-high for 3-point FG made (4) ... Middle Tennessee ran its winning streak against Sun Belt competition to 25 with the victory over FIU. The last Blue Raider loss in league play was February 27, 2006, at Florida International, a 73-57 defeat ... The Blue Raiders also upped their winning streak to 31 straight at home against SBC foes. The last time Middle Tennessee dropped a conference home game was February 5, 2004, in double overtime against Western Kentucky ... With the win, Middle Tennessee improved to 16-0 at home under third-year head coach Rick Insell and upped its mark to 46-4 when holding an opponent under 65 points ... Middle Tennessee is now 6-2 in Sun Belt home openers and 22-8 all-time in home conference openers. The Blue Raiders have won four consecutive home SBC openers ... Middle Tennessee tied its season-high with 12 3-pointers in the game and also set a season-low with just eight turnovers. **POSTGAME QUOTES**
Head Coach Rick Insell
On tonight's win
"We shoot the ball a lot better than we showed (tonight). I thought Jackie Pickel came in and really gave us a spurt. She's been struggling from the 3-point line, and when she hit that first one I knew real quick (that she would shoot well). I thought Jackie came in and gave Amber [Holt] a chance to catch her breath. And I thought when we took Brandi [Brown] out and got Emily [Queen] in that Emily gave us a little spurt there. This is the way all of our games are going to be this year. We're not going to run away with any games; we're just going to have to work and turn our offense and hopefully get the ball in to Amber and hopefully she can get it to our other people when they're open, and they've got to knock down shots." **On the play of Amber Holt**
"She had a double-double. What can you say? Third double-double in four games, that's nearly unheard of, especially someone her size, she's playing out of position. We're wearing Amber Holt out. She can hardly get up and down the floor because we're having to play her 38, 40 minutes a night." **On room for improvement**
"What I'm disappointed in (is that) we got outrebounded 45-32. Starr Orr had four rebounds, and Brandi Brown had two in 30 minutes. That's not acceptable. We're going to have to get turnovers if we're going to win games because we're not rebounding. What we're going to work on is our rebounding and our defense. Rebounding is nothing but just wanting to go get the ball. It's not making excuses, it's just going and getting the basketball. We're just not doing it." **On the next game**
"Now we're 1-0 in the conference, that's the positive for us. We've got a tough game at South Alabama. We've got to go down right off the bat and get into conference play, and they're going to come at us hard and heavy. They're very athletic, probably more athletic than Florida International was." **Senior forward Amber Holt**

On playing the entire game

"I don't have a choice. I have to go out there and play. Who else is going to go in there and rebound?" **On FIU's defensive approach**

"I know they're going to come in and double team me. They want me to shoot the jump shot because they think I can't make it, but I can make it." **On going on the road**

"We don't have that many fans coming on the road with us. That's what makes us more hyped to come out there and want to play." **Sophomore forward Brandi Brown**

On shooting three-pointers

"We're always going to shoot a lot of three's, we always have. Coach wants us to shoot the three. He's always made sure that we know if we don't shoot, we're not going to play. (Making those shots gives us) the momentum. The three gets us a quicker lead. It's the easiest thing. We sort of take for granted the inside game, and we probably should go inside more." **Florida International Head Coach Cindy Russo**

On handling Middle Tennessee's pressure

"We've always expected pressure from them. They are a good pressuring team. That's their forte and we need to handle it better." **On outrebounding Middle Tennessee**

"We outrebounded them and shot a nice percentage. I thought we just turned the ball over too much. We need to take care of the ball in order to win." **On sustaining spurts of momentum throughout the game**

"We played some spurts of good defense, but it got lost in their system. I think it is really hard to be pressured that much for 40 minutes and not lose some part of your game." **On the play of Middle Tennessee's Amber Holt**

"I think they did a nice job. She is a great player. She has to be your game plan, but we also know they can kick out and spread the ball across the floor. They were hitting 3-pointers tonight. I saw film after film where they were not hitting their shots. We made some mental errors on picking them up and they burned us there." **On the play of Iva Ciglar and LaQuetta Ferguson**

"I think they did have a good night in some sense. As guards they need to take better care of the ball. The execution of the offense failed because the defensive pressure might have gotten to them a time or two." **On some positives to take away from the loss**

"I think we played with some passion. Being able to come in and terribly outrebound a Middle Tennessee team at home is a pretty good positive. We do some nice things, but putting it together for 40 minutes is still an issue for us. We play a lot of young players. We are a little shorthanded. We lost our two starting posts for the year. We are searching for some answers inside. It's just a matter of time before we find some answers, but we just lost them and it's hard to adjust without them."

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